CITY/REGION

Watchdog group marks anniversary

Citizens Project urges tolerance

By **Risa Berg**
Gazette Telegraph

Throughout the past year, about 15,000 "Celebrate Diversity" stickers have been put on bumpers in the Pikes Peak region.

The bright blue stickers are the work of the grass-roots organization Citizens Project, which Sunday night marked its first anniversary.

Members say the bumper stickers symbolize more than just good marketing; they represent a community working to do just what the slogan urges — celebrate diversity.

About 300 people gathered at the Palmer High School auditorium Sunday evening to discuss the group's first year of work. The group was created by Doug Triggs and Amy Divine in response to what they saw as a burgeoning religious-based political movement in the Pikes Peak region. The group now has 6,000 people on its mailing list, Divine said.

Critics of the group contend it is anti-religious and intolerant of views that differ from those of its members.

Members, however, say this is not true. Greg Walta, a local attorney who sponsored and then later withdrew a compromise measure to Amendment 2, said in his keynote speech that the group is dedicated to maintaining a separation of church and state — not eliminating people's right to religious choice. "Tolerance has never been anti-Christian," he said. "The best of Christianity has always fostered respect for others."

He decried what he called attempts by religious fundamentalists to introduce religion into school curricula by complaining that the separation of church and state is anti-Christian. "This is really a sad attempt at revisionist history and can't succeed," Walta told the audience.

Bruce Loeffler, a professor at Colorado College and a member of the group's board, sought to dispel what he called "myths" about the group. For example, the belief by some in the community that the group is filled with left-wing extremists is "poppycock," he said.

"Only in a town like Colorado Springs would such a moderate position be labeled left wing," Loeffler commented, drawing laughter and applause.

Divine, one of the founders of Citizens Project, said the group can't be labeled as a gay-rights organization simply because it has fought against Amendment 2. The amendment, approved by voters in November, would prohibit laws banning discrimination against homosexuals based on their sexual orientation. The measure is on hold pending a court battle over its constitutionality.

"We see it as a bill that gives a group fewer rights," Divine said, and as such should be opposed by a group dedicated to human rights.

The group will continue to monitor stealth candidates in school elections, Divine said, and she urged members to get involved in local politics. Stealth candidates are defined as those who do not disclose controversial beliefs during their campaigns but who plan to act on them if elected.

One of the group's main projects for the next year, she said, will be to sponsor "dialogue dinners," where small groups of people with different views discuss community issues.

"We need understanding on all sides," said member Howard Reisner. "People must be willing to be open to different opinions. That's the key — understanding."

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By **Erin Emery**/Gaze

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